

assignments 3C

readings

Excerpt from TIMELESS TREASURES

Third Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche

THREE PRECISE PRAJNAS

Please understand that words alone are of no use. Only by understanding and integrating the genuine meaning of the words of the Buddhadharma into your life will your mind find peace.

The crux of Buddhist practice is developing what are called the three prajnas. Prajna is a Sanskrit term, which translates as something like transcendent knowledge, superior knowledge, or precise knowledge. It simply refers to knowing in a way that is clear-cut, accurate, and refined: precise knowing. Each of the three core Buddhist practice activities of listening to, contemplating, and meditating on the Dharma generate one corresponding prajna, or precise knowing.

Listening refers, of course, to hearing the teachings, but also to reading, discussing, or otherwise learning the literal sense of Buddhadharma. You can think of it as the prajna that comes from listening is knowing the literal sense of the terms presented in the teachings: a correct intellectual understanding of the content of a particular topic.

Next comes contemplating the meaning of the teachings received. We dissect the understanding gained in the first step, using valid reasoning. In essence, we are digesting the prajna that comes from listening, extracting the nutrients. Contemplation yields a second prajna, the knowing gained from contemplation. This is also an intellectual understanding, but of a deeper and more sustained character than the first.

Lastly, the practitioner cultivates familiarity with the genuine meaning of the words of the teaching through meditation. This is the process of infusing the mind with the knowing gained through contemplation. It is accomplished in formal meditation sessions, by alternately bringing to mind certainty about the topic under contemplation, then remaining in steady meditative equipoise with that certainty as the object of meditation.

This produces the prajna gained from meditation. The remainder of the path consists of strengthening and expanding the prajna that comes of meditation to its full strength.

This third prajna is experiential knowing rather than intellectual understanding. Developing it is the aim of practice, the faculty that illuminates the true nature just as it is. It relies, however, on first developing the prajna gained from contemplation, which in turn depends on the prajna that comes of listening.

LISTEN • CONTEMPLATE • MEDITATE

Note that this is a single process with three overlapping phases within it. While it is a valuable and important first step, listening to and understanding the teachings on a literal level alone is not sufficient. If the prajna that comes from contemplating what one has understood through listening does not arise, subsequently the prajna that arises from meditating on the deeper meaning gained through contemplation will be absent, and we remain unable to integrate the teachings.

The measure of completion of this process is qualitative rather than quantitative—you cannot gauge success through the number of hours or days or years invested. Rather, success is established along the lines of a popular Tibetan principle of practice:

The sign of correct listening and contemplating is that mind becomes peaceful and calm. The sign of correct meditation is that emotional affliction diminishes.

The sequence of listening, contemplating, and meditating is repeated with every Dharma teaching you encounter. Once we follow the sequence through to developing the prajna acquired through meditation, we then carefully nurture that precise knowing, cultivating it to greater and greater intensity through repeated practice.

Prajna—precise knowledge or knowing—becomes an integral part of our daily lives through the combined process of listening, contemplating, and meditating. First we listen to the Buddha’s teachings. From that, we develop the prajna gained from listening.

Understanding the content of the teachings through listening or reading gives rise to the prajna and frees you from the obscuration of ignorance. Precise knowledge of the meaning of the words, obtained through contemplation, overcomes the thick darkness of doubt, the state of being equivocal about the subject matter of the teachings received. The prajna coming from meditation gives direct access to the true nature of things.

The teachings are very vast and profound. This threefold organic process of development progresses from learning the correct view presented in the teachings, to deeply understanding it with increasing subtlety. Each new level of prajna builds on the previous one. Once you attain some measure of understanding through listening and contemplating, you cultivate familiarity with that view through meditation.

By repeating the process again and again with each aspect of the Dharma, rather than restricting it to a one-time event, meditation progressively instills a vivid experience of the certainty generated through contemplation that accords with the words of the Buddha. The integrative force generated by the prajna gained from meditation steadily informs your conduct more and more over time. Eventually, your actions become automatically align with the view integrated through meditation.

Incorporating the Dharma in your life means just that—living with correct view, meditation, and conduct in harmony.

ASPIRE TO THE THREE PRAJNAS

Rangjung Dorje, the third Karmapa, includes in his Aspiration Prayer of Mahamudra this brief but rich statement on the roles of listening, contemplating, and meditating.

*Listening to scriptures and reasonings dispels the obscurations of ignorance,
Contemplating the pith instructions conquers the darkness of doubt,
Meditation's light illuminates the true nature just as it is — May the
brilliance of the three prajnas flourish!*

Consider using this as a basis for building your own practice of setting the intention accurately to integrate the Buddha's teachings.

STUDY VERSUS MEDITATION

There are two different approaches to integrating the teachings of Dharma.

The first approach is study-focused, with emphasis on listening and contemplating. You listen to the teachings and contemplate the meaning thus gained, using valid reasoning, for an extended period of time— even over the course of many years. In this study-focused approach, the aim is to gain an accurate understanding of the correct view. This correct understanding then forms the basis for developing confidence.

By contemplating through valid reasoning the meaning of teachings you received, as applied to your own personal circumstances, you come to experience both the Dharma's objective validity and its subjective relevance. Over time, the initial manifestation of confidence increases. Then you engage in meditation on the subject matter studied.

Meditation, in Tibetan gom (Tib. sgom), simply means to cultivate familiarity with something, such that you become habituated to it. Certainty comes about through meditation practice—in other words, by cultivating familiarity with the knowledge acquired and refined through study, you develop conviction in the underlying subject matter.

By contrast, the second approach begins with deep confidence and faith in the Buddhadharmā. This does not mean, however, that it does away with any knowledge of the Buddha's teachings. Actually, even in this faith-based approach, you need a rudimentary understanding of the core subject matter. The difference lies in emphasis, as compared to the study approach.

Here, the focus is not on extensive study, but on meditation, to gradually experience the correct view presented by the Buddha in practice. In short, it is possible to develop correct Buddhist view through either intensive study combined with meditation or mainly meditation alongside a fundamental understanding of Dharma.

The important thing to remember is that both approaches incorporate all three elements of listening, contemplating, and meditating, differing only in the emphasis accorded to each,

depending on the temperament of the practitioner. Neither study nor meditation alone is sufficient, as Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye describes in this vivid analogy:

*Meditating without view Is like a blind person wandering across a vast plain.
Study without meditation Is like scaling the face of a cliff without arms.*

Please be aware of these two possibilities in your practice. Consider carefully what these two approaches have in common, and which best suits your temperament. This is what is relevant in evaluating which method to apply—in and of themselves, each is equally beneficial. Yet, both approaches require active participation, and both stress meditation as indispensable.

reflection

As we move towards our last cloister weekend of this program, the importance of being clear about the terminology, not only semantically, not only intellectually, but also experientially is key. In other words, it is vital that we study—that is, listen and contemplate—as well as become familiar with—meditate on—the seminal terms of integrative practice.

The shift from contemplation to meditation, from semantic and intellectual understanding to the certainty that is clear knowing, is the biggest obstacle to progress in this practice.

So, one more time, a primer on the words and their meaning. I encourage you not only to read this assignment, but to toss it around in thought, discussion group, questions, and even journaling or debate. Without this initial digesting of the material, attempts to meditate on its significance, not to mention to apply it in meditative inquiry, are hampered.

First of all, what is “clear knowing?” This term, *nge she* in Tibetan phonetics, literally means certain, definite, sure (*nge*) + knowing, consciousness, understanding (*she*). It is often translated as certainty, or certitude, and the like. I prefer “clear knowing” because it mirrors the two-part structure of the Tibetan, and avoids the confusion of competing associations with terms such as certainty, certitude, and so forth. I also feel it conveys the experience of *nge she* more directly.

Well then, what isn’t “clear knowing.” Most importantly, the understanding of listening and of contemplating—the semantic and intellectual comprehension that comes of study—is not “clear knowing.” Nor are the sudden bursts of insight that we may get in everyday life or on the cushion, wholly apart from the experiential analysis of integrative meditation, necessarily clear knowing.

This is the most common confusion. Whenever we resonate with a teaching, or get a glimmer of meaning, we are eager to label that “clear knowing.” This itself can be an impediment to practice, as we become complacent about our level of understanding, and stop there. Contemplation is where most Westerners hang out—if they get there at all.

Yet, the point of integrative practice is the third phase: habituation to the view gain through listening and contemplating, in the crucible of formal practice of meditative inquiry, on the cushion. This is what is able to counteract our inordinate familiarity with the misperception that is the root of samsara.

A second, more subtle misunderstanding is to equate meditative experience with clear knowing. Practice can elicit powerful moments of insight and experience, seemingly arising independent of all else. These are important fruits of practice, and the more consistently we engage in integrative practice, the more these experiences will arise—not only on the cushion, but in everyday life, in dreams, and more.

How to distinguish “clear knowing” from understanding and experiences? The crucial distinction lies in Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye’s quote, in Reflections & Readings 2.

Here it is again:

It is in the process of contemplating terminology and meaning well that we cut through the superimposition of indecision through (1) rough examination and (2) intricate investigation.

Listening one time through, we may feel we have attained a rough understanding, yet a definitive comprehension escapes us. This is because it is through intricate investigation of each word's meaning, working it this way and that against a broad range of scripture and reasoning, that clear knowing arises with authenticity.

***In this approach**, the way to contemplate is to engage in what may be called an “**inner dialogue**” on two levels. The first of these consists of **examination** which is the level of rough overview. The second is **investigation**, which is intricately subtle. This process yields profound understanding of the meaning of the target object of knowledge with reliability.*

Key point 1: clear knowing cuts through superimposition of indecision. What does that mean? It is an incisive experience of knowing something that was murky, clouded by misunderstanding. Key point 2: two mental factors—examination and investigation—generate it. These two factors are crucial to the experiential analysis involved in the “analytical” half of meditative inquiry. To the extent we worked with the five omnipresent mental factors, we can start going deeper, identifying the more subtle conceptuality of examination and investigation.

The Wholehearted Engagement exercises of last month are one way of discovering and cultivating familiarity with subtle experiential analysis of mind. Without consistent practice of these exercises, progress in integrative practice generally, and the shift into meditative inquiry in particular, is erratic at best.

Building on those exercises, we continue our listening and contemplation of “examination” and “investigation. Like the five omnipresent mental factors we studied and experienced in

the Wholehearted Engagement exercises, examination and investigation are mental factors (also called mental events, mental occurrences, mental states, etc.). They are described as:

Examination (Skr. vitakka) means the mental interchange consisting of surveying. It is a particular case of precise knowledge (Skr. prajna) and volition. "Survey" means to engage in identification, such as "What is this?" "Mental interchange" is called that because it is akin to verbal expression, where "interchange" refers to meaningful interchange. To say that it is a particular case of precise knowledge and volition refers to volition characterized by that mindset that elicits movement, and precise knowledge that takes the form of discerning between excellent qualities and failings.

Mental engagement powered by [precise knowledge and volition] refers to its falling under the rubric of either one or the other, as the case may be. "As the case may be" means that it pertains to precise knowledge sometimes and volition at others, corresponding to the presence or absence of conceptualization, respectively. Alternatively, when both precise knowledge and volition are involved, it is categorized as conceptualization, because the mind can engage in this way. Examining is coarse or rough, that is to say, it takes the form of just surveying something.

Investigation (Skr. vicara) is a finer version of this. It is also a particular case of precise knowledge (Skr. prajna) and volition. Investigation means the mental interchange consisting of detailed discrimination, that is to say, the stating "It is this," about something previously comprehended. For this reason, it is said to be a soothed mindset.

Acharya Sthiramati, A Commentary on Vasubandhu's "Treatise In Thirty Stanzas" (Karma Yeshe Chödrön, translator).

That's pretty dense. Let's unpack it a bit.

Both examination (sometimes also called identification) and investigation are mental factors. Both are conceptual thought. They differ as to their depth, or intricacy.

Examination (Skr. vitakka) is the initial engagement of a sense contact prompted by precise knowledge or volition. It is the initial identification beyond the instantaneous discrimination of the sense contact, be it a physical sense object (sight, sound, smell, taste, or texture) or a mental one (thought). A common example in traditional literature is the striking of a bell.

Investigation (Skr. vicara) keeps the mind anchored to a sense contact, again prompted by precise knowledge or volition. It is the sustained interchange of mind and its object previously pinpointed or identified by examination, over a series of instants. The traditional example is the sound of a bell after it is struck.

Both examination and investigation operate in everyday contexts and spiritual practice. For example, the initial identification, locating, or pinpointing of the breath as an object of

shamatha meditation is a function of examination. The sustained interchange of mind with the breath as its object during that shamatha meditation is a function of investigation. Each can be afflictive or non-afflictive, depending on the impetus propelling it.

When we begin working with the five omnipresent mental factors in the Wholehearted Engagement exercises, we often group examination and investigation with discrimination, laying out a whole storyline that is more accurately a function of these two later-arising factors, rather than the immediate moment of discrimination arising with sense contact.

The next step is to start teasing out these factors, which are crucial to developing mind's pliability both in concentrative (shamatha) and incisive (vipashyana) meditation. They are also vital to the meditative inquiry that is the third phase of integrative practice.

As you can see from these descriptions, there is more going on here, and at deeper, subtler, and more intricate levels, than our ordinary sense of "examination" and "investigation." These forces are at play in the "analytical meditation," and "resting meditation" phases of meditative inquiry in integrative practice.

If you are not getting listening, contemplating, and mediating yet, it is likely due to being unclear about these two factors per se, how to implement them, and the "clear knowing," that comes of employing them with precision and consistency.

practice

Using a present experience of understanding or insight, or the recollection of one past, clarify for yourself the distinctions between "clear knowing" and understanding, be it semantic or intellectual.

Identify the difference between "clear knowing" and emotional resonance. Determine the distinction between "clear knowing" and meditative experience. Try to classify specific examples of understanding in your own experience as one of these.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to explain these distinctions in words. It would be an injustice to provide such a description even were it possible, in my view, as it cheats us of discovering it for ourselves, deepening the intimacy with our own mind.

If you simply can't make the distinctions, devise questions to pinpoint your confusion about each.

We will be sharing our experiences of clear knowing, either of identifying or questioning, during the Cloister 3 weekend.

wholehearted engagement exercise 4

This exercise is a formal meditation practice, undertaken on the cushion, and should follow a period of shamatha. Before beginning on this exercise, please check in with yourself as to your fluency with exercises 1-3 in the Wholehearted Engagement series.

If you have not engaged these earlier exercises consistently, you may find that this exercise feels frustrating. Returning to the earlier exercises to cultivate and strengthen familiarity with the experiential analysis that is central to this practice may help.

If you have engaged these earlier exercises consistently, it helps to ease out of shamatha by using any sense contact present before you to experientially analyze the five omnipresent factors before continuing to this next step of experiential analysis.

CONTEMPLATIVE READING: LABELING

Read the following passage slowly and carefully, preferably out loud using the Contemplative Reading instructions in the Cloister 3 Readings handout.

As you do so, focus not only on the sound and the meaning, but the shape of the letters, the texture of the paper, smell of the ink, and even the feel of the words in your mouth. Make it a full-on sensory experience, not merely a cognitive one. Bring your understanding of it, at any level it arises from superficial to profound, into the body.

To see that how we label things is how they appear does not mean that we stop working with outer circumstances. Often external situations do need to be changed in a concrete, reliable way. Otherwise, there would never have been any civil rights movement, or any other actions by heroic bodhisattvas who are inspired to help at the outer level. But if we don't work with our own mind and perceptions, no political or economic revolution will really change the deep habits that keep us caught in our own emotional struggles—which lead to most of our struggles with other people. If we don't notice and work with our projections, we won't be able to reduce the suffering of ourselves and others. Nor will we be able to fulfill our longing and commitment to wake up for the benefit of all living beings.

...

Trungpa Rinpoche used the phrase “random labeling” to help us realize the arbitrariness of how we often speak and think about things. If you speak English, you use the word “chair” for the object you sit on. In Romanian, it's scaun. In Zulu, it's isihlalo. It's just a neutral object, and then we give it a label. Of course, we need language so that we are able to coexist and talk about things. It's an innocent part of human behavior. But then this strange thing happens where the object or feeling or person that we label actually becomes that label in our mind. We believe in our arbitrary designation.

If we get too fixated on our label, we forget that the nature of things is open, fluid, and subject to change and interpretation. When I labeled the kitchen as “dirty”—a label that had a strong emotional charge for me—it became fixed that way in my mind and colored how I actually saw it. But if we remember that labels are merely labels, we can use them to our advantage. We can use the fluid, open-to-interpretation nature of things to work with our habits.

The more we experiment with labels, the easier it becomes to see through them and to use them to our advantage. We will continue to use labels to think and communicate—but more positively, and without investing them with so much seriousness. Trungpa Rinpoche told this story about how he once was sitting in a garden with Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, one of his most important teachers. They were just enjoying their time together in the beautiful setting, hardly saying anything, simply happy to be there with each other. Then Khyentse Rinpoche pointed and said, “They call that a ‘tree,’” and both of them roared with laughter. For me this is a wonderful illustration of the freedom and enjoyment that await us when we stop being fooled by our labels. The two enlightened teachers thought it was a riot that this complex, changing phenomenon, with all its leaves and bark and fragrance, could be thought of merely as a “tree.” As our labels loosen their grip on us, we too will start to experience our world in this lighter, more magical way.

Pema Chodron. *Welcoming the Unwelcome: Wholehearted Living in a Brokenhearted World.* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019) at 74-80.

EXPERIENTIAL ANALYSIS: EXAMINATION AND INVESTIGATION

Consider the labeling Ani Pema speaks of in this passage. Using any present sense contact, analyze it experientially, identifying the five omnipresent mental factors that spontaneously arise. Go further, using experiential analysis to identify the examination and investigation that arise from precise knowledge or volition, subtly spinning out a whole storyline about the sense object.

To begin with, start with a visual object. Really. I mean it. We may tend to choose conceptual thought as the object of this practice, sometimes without realizing it.

Although ultimately, we can use any object of the physical senses or a thought or emotions, first things first. A visual object has more continuity and serves as a better support for commencing experiential analysis. Our habit of being carried off by thoughts and emotions is too powerful to overcome in early stages.

wholehearted engagement exercise 5

After practicing Wholehearted Engagement exercise 4 in several formal meditation sessions over a few days at least, proceed to this next step.

CONTEMPLATIVE READING: OPEN AWARENESS

Read the following using Contemplative Reading as described in exercise 4 above.

There are many ways to practice open awareness, but the essence of them all is simply to show up for your life—senses open, mind and heart open—and let yourself be as free of conceptual limitations as you can be. In other words, let yourself be as free as you can from labels—“good” and “bad,” “self” and “other,” and all the rest. Let yourself be in this state as much as possible, according to your current level of understanding.

You can approach this practice with the attitude of “sitting in the middle of what’s happening.” For instance, say you’re beginning an hour-long group meditation session and right away this huge anger toward someone comes up. Immediately it turns into a big issue with a storyline, full of labeling and subject-object fixations. Since you’re stuck on your meditation cushion, all you can do is sit in the middle of the whole mess and, as much as possible, let go of your concepts and labels. Every time those angry thoughts come up, without repressing them you just interrupt their momentum and come back to open awareness. At the same time, you can give your big, heated issue a lot of space, so that sitting in the middle doesn’t become claustrophobic. You can feel the space in your whole body, from the top of your head to the soles of your feet. Or you can go bigger, giving it the space of the room or even the vast space outside.

After sitting like this for a while, you may suddenly realize, “Where did that go?” But next thing you know, you’re thinking about being criticized and you’re getting worked up again. Again, you sit in the middle of it and keep letting the labeling go, with that sense of space. Eventually you find yourself again wondering, where did that go? As you continue through this cycle, you start to realize that your life is filled with dramas that seem to be the center of your world. But if you keep sitting in the middle of it all, you feel it as a flow. It’s not so solid anymore. It’s all impermanent, and that is very good news.

This approach is similar to the practice of “just as it is.” But open awareness implies an additional level of insight, which keeps unfolding over time. As we train ourselves to notice how we continually label things, we start to see how much we create our own reality. I have often found this insight to be astonishing.

This creation process starts at a very basic level. We all have a deep propensity to label things automatically—and often unconsciously—as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We like it, we don't like it, or we don't care one way or the other. But "pleasant" can easily escalate into craving, crippling addiction, and all kinds of outer manifestations such as animal exploitation and the sex trade. "Unpleasant" can lead to deep-seated prejudice, hatred, and violence. And "neutral" can easily turn into indifference, being out of touch with our feelings, ignoring others, not helping people out who are in distress. All of these simple labels can manifest and escalate at the individual and the global level.

Sitting in the middle and practicing open awareness is an antidote to all these types of escalation. Because we have so many karmic seeds in our unconscious, all kinds of troubling thoughts and emotions are constantly coming up. But every time we sit with them, giving them as much space as they require, we are burning up those karmic seeds without creating new ones. Whenever the next drama pops up in your mind—whether it's a painful childhood memory or overpowering anger at your boss—if you sit in the middle of the mess and practice open awareness, you're shifting your habitual patterns. You may feel like nothing's changing, but there's a slow simmer going on. It may not be obvious, but your practice is burning up those karmic seeds, slowly but surely.

Every once in a while, you might have a more powerful insight into the profundity of open awareness. It can feel quite exhilarating, even mind-blowing. But at this stage, the experience is only a fleeting glimpse. If you try to hold on to it, if you try to get it back when it's gone, then you are going after the pleasant, rather than being with things just as they are. You are back in the realm of sem, the limited, conceptual mind.

Practicing open awareness is a gradual process of continually going back to seeing what we're seeing, smelling what we're smelling, feeling what we're feeling. Whatever happens, the method is to keep letting go of the extra stuff and return to just what's here. The rain in the morning isn't good or bad, comforting or threatening. It's not even "rain." It's just what it is. Everything is just what it is, beautiful yet ultimately indescribable. If we keep doing this practice—over and over, year after year, in formal meditation and in our everyday lives—we will develop unshakeable confidence that this conceptless way of being is in perfect harmony with how things really are. This will give us unshakeable confidence in our connection to others, and in our basic goodness.

Pema Chodron. *Welcoming the Unwelcome: Wholehearted Living in a Brokenhearted World.* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2019) at 83-86.

EXPERIENTIAL ANALYSIS: OPEN AWARENESS

Practice open awareness as Ani Pema describes in this passage.

Anything that arises for you in the moment is a sense contact. Just stay with the raw data, be it a thought, a sound, a sight, or what have you.

Encourage your mind to stay, rather than follow the storylines that spin out after the initial moment of contact. If you find yourself entangled in a storyline, feel glad that you spotted it and take up a new sense contact, allowing it to arise, remain, and cease. Then another. And another.

Experience your mind as it does what it does—taking in this continual flow of experience, without interference, labeling, or pursuit.

Nothing to do.

Just surf your mind.

Allow experience, raw and natural.

Let go of the ideas, opinions, concepts, story.

Welcome what is just as it is. Let go of it, right at the cusp of the volition to spin stories.

Welcome. Let go.

Welcome.

Let go.